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SUBJECT: GABON AS EL DORADO

¶1. On January 29, 2007, 75 West African immigrants attempting to enter Gabon illegally were detained by local authorities as they disembarked from a boat. The group, which included 65 men, 9 women and one child, were nationals of Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Niger, Ghana and Burkina Faso. In an interview with Gabon's daily newspaper (L'Union), one of the immigrants (from Niger) described Gabon being viewed throughout West Africa as a land of promise or "El Dorado."

¶2. According to Lieutenant Herve Chaby-Bion, head of the Gendarmerie Coast Guard Brigade, illegal immigration to Gabon from West African countries is alive and well, by land and sea. He estimates, in the absence of official statistics, that at least one boat per week enters Gabon's waters with West African immigrants. The size of the boats, and thus the number of immigrants, varies from small "pirogues" to commercial vessels. For example, Chaby-Bion recounted the story of an Asian commercial vessel arriving from Cameroon with immigrants smuggled in its cargo hold. Most boats, he added, originate from Oron, Nigeria. The last boat the gendarmerie seized was in November 2006 and held 48 immigrants.

¶3. Chaby-Bion stated that the West Africans come to Gabon for economic reasons. They arrive and do the work Gabonese will not do, earn higher incomes than they could in their home countries, then spend the money in their home countries building homes or supporting family. He stated that despite Gabon's declining oil production, illegal immigration from West Africa has not slowed in the three years he has worked at the Gendarmerie Coast Guard Brigade.

¶4. Comment: In general, West Africans have found success in Gabon and the Gabonese have accepted them. However, as oil production, and revenues, decline these immigrants are finding a less and less welcoming environment. One cabinet minister recently told the Ambassador that in earlier years many of the immigrants were physicians, university professors and teachers. Now, the majority are unskilled day laborers seeking any kind of work - and raising fear among Gabonese about an increase in crime. Estimates vary, but there is conjecture that over 20 percent of Gabon's 1.4 million population may currently be made up of Africans from other countries.

WALKLEY